

Sermon *Forgiveness and the Forgetfulness of God*
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 9.14.25

Exodus 32:7-14
Psalm 51:1-11
1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

Here is my parable of the lost cell phone. I came back from the gym, and my cell phone was not in my pocket. I panicked. Everything is connected to that phone and if I left it at the gym it might be gone forever! After calming down, I realized I listened to music on the way home so it's probably in the car. I got a flashlight, opened all the doors, and searched. When I didn't find it, I used Christi's phone and called my phone. I heard the soft buzzing sound underneath the rear passenger floor mat. I found it! I was so happy I went inside and woke everyone up and said, "What was lost has been found. I had lost my cell phone but here it is!"

Okay, I didn't wake everyone up, but you get the point. I was happy to have found it. Likewise, with Jesus's parable of the one who found the lost sheep, the shepherd wouldn't call all his friends and neighbors in the town and say to them, "Rejoice with me for I have found my sheep that was lost!" That's an over-emphasis on the story to show the point of the story – "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous person who need no repentance." Although a shepherd would not necessarily act that way in the 1st century, I do believe there is great joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.

The Epistle reading for this Sunday, from Paul's first letter to Timothy, Paul begins the letter with how he was the foremost sinner, ever. He was "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence." But he received mercy. Not only mercy, he received "grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." This highlights God's forgiveness for all of us. Although none of us were as "bad" as Paul, we all are guilty of sin and all forgiven when we ask it... and there is great rejoicing in heaven when we do!

This has been a difficult week. We are shocked again to our core because of political violence. It also was the 24th remembrance of the events of September 11th. God placed on my heart to talk about forgiveness – it's the only way, in my opinion, to make it through this tumultuous century.

God forgives and I believe that God forgets. The phrase, from today's psalm (51), "Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities." If you've ever written with a quill and ink pot, you'll know that you can accidentally blot out words with ink. The term comes from an ancient accounting practice. A scroll would have a ledger of debts and credits. When a debt was paid, the accountant would take a large amount of ink and blot out the debt so that even if you held the papyrus up to the light you couldn't see the debt. That's the image used in the Old and New Testament about how God treats our offenses/debts when we ask for forgiveness – they are blotted out. In other words, God forgets them.

When I explain this to people, the conversation bounces between two idioms: forgive-and-forget and once-bitten, twice-shy. The point of taking time on September 11th every year is to not forget. Forgetting, in this case, is bad. Yet, in the context of forgiveness, God forgets. Once-bitten, twice-shy is how we remember those who have harmed, or bitten, us and to avoid them so we don't get bitten again. What are we to do with all of this?

This weekend, I was doing a chore and I started thinking about betrayal – in particular, how Peter and Judas betrayed Jesus and how all the rest left Jesus by himself on his worst day. Ouch. You know my style of preaching; I started thinking of when I had been betrayed and would parley that into thinking about Jesus and how he was betrayed. But here's the problem, I couldn't think of a time when I had been betrayed. *Thanks be to God!* I thought. How great is that?! And then I thought some more. I started to remember echoes, or shadows of betrayal. That's when I realized I had been, as we all have been, but I had forgiven them. In the forgiving, I had forgotten. The Lord also pointed out there were times that I have wronged others. They too have forgiven me and have forgotten too. Thanks be to God!!

Forgiveness is a gift from God. We can't do it without God's help. And, there is great rejoicing when we seek forgiveness from God and, I think, there is great rejoicing in heaven when we forgive others too.

The basics of forgiveness is not letting someone have the power of wronging us. To forgive is to let them stop renting space in our heads and hearts. Forgiving is letting go of the hurt and pain. And no, you don't have to forget. Let that be God's domain. But, we do need to forgive; when we are ready. When we do, there is great rejoicing in heaven.

One more thing about forgetting. I had a friend and fellow camp counsellor whose dad was a judge. I was studying pre-law so I was naturally interested in what he did for a living. Beyond that, however, we had studied a case he presided over. It was a local Indian tribe requested that two youths, who stole money from a pizza delivery driver, be sentenced to a remote island for a year instead of in jail (it was a tradition of that tribe to do it as they believe the isolation teaches them a lot about life and depending on others and oneself). The judge agreed. I asked him about the case and he said he didn't remember. I said, "How can you not remember??" He said they have notes, and court reporters, and case law all so that judges don't have to remember each case. Then he said, "It's actually a gift – to forget – because if we did hold onto all the cases, we would have a lot of people retiring early because of the weight of the position."

Think of God in a purely human way, I'd imagine God couldn't put up with humankind for very long unless God had the ability to forget what was confessed and forgiven. When I hear confessions, I will often tell the person that I'll forget what they've said. Back when I was a new priest, people would tell me things, I'd forget them, and then months later they'd bring up the conversation and, for the life of me, I couldn't remember what they talked about. It's a little off-putting; if I can gauge their reaction; to have a priest that forgets. So nowadays, I simply tell people what happens with me. In priest-training-school (seminary), we are told that we cannot treat the person who confessed any differently after we heard what was on the heart and mind. In other words, treat them the same from before confession to afterward. Thankfully for me, God has helped me forget what was said so that I find it easy to treat them the same.

The New Testament has two different visions of how the Judgement Seat will work (both are based on how the Judgement Seat worked in their civic life [Pontus Pilate sat on the Judgement Seat, as an example]). One way is that each of us will be face to face with Jesus on the Judgement Seat. For those who have confessed all their wrongdoings, he will not remember, or pass, the person through. The other view is that for those who confess, they will avoid the judgement seat. Either way, we will be face to face with God and will give an accounting of our life. When we confess what we have done wrong, we are forgiven; and, as I've talked about, God forgets. Another way to look at this is what a Sunday School teacher told me – on the day of judgement, don't surprise Jesus. Tell him what you've done before you get there. When we repent/confess there is great celebration in heaven. The celebration, I'd like to think, is what God remembers. The sin that we confessed, well, that's been forgotten. Thanks be to God.